

The power of one

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It is a great honor to share this day of accomplishment and celebration with the graduates of The Ohio State University and their families and friends. I know that you have worked hard and long for your degrees, and that for many if not most of you the emotional and financial support from your families and friends has been of paramount importance to your achievement today. I would especially like to congratulate those of you who are the first in your families to receive a college degree...This is truly an outstanding accomplishment. And I offer special congratulations as well to the many international students here today. We are pleased that you chose the Ohio State University for your studies and proud that you will represent the university in your future endeavors.

In addition to the great honor of sharing this celebration with you, I viewed this as an opportunity to talk to some people who are or will be in a position to make a positive difference in this world. And we badly need more people committed to making such a difference. The fact of the matter is that this is not a very nice world for large numbers of people. A panel of the American Psychological Association, following an extensive review, concluded that two of the most serious threats to not only the physical but

the mental health of the people in this world were poverty and violence. Let me give you some examples.

1. In this country alone, 36 million people live in poverty; 80% of those are women and children. Worldwide it is estimated that 40,000 children die each day of starvation and preventable disease.
2. In the United States alone, there are 10 million displaced homemakers, women who were taught by society that they would be economically provided for by a man, only to lose that provision through divorce, widowhood, or the disablement of their husbands? Gloria Steinem said that the average woman is one man away from welfare, and these 10 million Displaced homemakers prove her point.
3. The number of babies born each year to unmarried American teenagers is enough to populate a new city the size of Seattle.
4. In a country which calls itself civilized, a woman is raped every 46 seconds and a woman is battered by the man she loves every 18 seconds. This means that during the 12 or so minutes of my talk, 16 women will be raped and 40 women will be battered.
5. We live in a world where Chico Mendez, who worked to save the Brazilian rainforest, is shot to death as he steps out his back door.
6. We live a world full of racial, ethnic, and religious

hatred. A world where, in Bosnia Herzegovina, all 150 villagers of the town of Ahatovici are machine gunned and dumped into a mass grave.

A world where a Justice of the Ohio Supreme court is recorded on tape making racist comments.

Where reports of anti-semitic harassment on U.S. college campuses increased from 312 in 1986 to 874 in 1992.

A world where in Arlington, Texas, three skinheads shoot and kill a black man as he stands on his own front lawn.

7. We live in a country where a gay sailor is beaten to death in a restroom by his fellow sailors, just because he's gay? He is beaten so badly that his mother has to identify what's left of his body from a tattoo on his arm?

What can you do about all of this? Can you really make a difference? One person? I believe that you can make a difference and, further, that you have a responsibility to try.

You can, first, recall the meaning of a word too little used in today's society...that word is compassion. The dictionary definition of this word is very simple...compassion refers to sorrow for the sufferings and troubles of others, accompanied by an urge to help. Allow yourself to feel compassion for the sufferings of others and then feel compelled to help rather than waiting for

someone else to do it.

I am reminded of the case of Kitty Genovese, who was murdered in New York City in the late 1960's...38 neighbors listened to her screams for over a half an hour, and no one called the police. Thirty-eight people sat in their apartments, listening to her die. Psychologists, including Bibb Latane of Ohio State, later studied this as the problem of the unresponsive bystander, as the diffusion of responsibility to help. They described it as "a terrifying failure of human compassion". I hope that you will not be a bystander, watching but doing nothing about suffering and injustice.

You can be an agent of positive social change. Positive Social change is simply this: doing something as an individual to make this a more humane world for all its occupants.

Social change can certainly mean becoming a politician or a lawyer and working for political or legal change. Social change can mean campaigning for political candidates in whom you believe.

Positive change can involve working for more humane policies in the organization where you work...policies that improve access to on-site child care, that provide leave for the care of newborn children or sick or aging parents or other family members, that communicate to workers the absolute unacceptability of sexual or racial harassment.

But positive change is also as simple as writing a check...a check to an organization that helps people, animals, or the environment. The most meaningful Christmas present I received this year was a donation in my name to a shelter for the homeless. You can start writing checks to the The United Way, a shelter for Battered Women, the Humane Society, or to Africare, the organization dedicated to feeding the starving throughout Africa.

Positive Social change is volunteering...as a Big Brother or Sister, at a preschool program for disadvantaged children, at a community recycling program or in a literacy program teaching adults to read. If you are preparing for such careers as law, counseling, medicine, or business, you can donate a part of your time to the provision of services or expertise to people who otherwise could not afford them.

Positive change can mean working to alleviate some of the causes of violence...the poverty and alienation of young people throughout the world.

If you are a woman, you can effect social change by refusing to accept a sexist society's messages about your worth and capabilities.

You can make sure you possess the skills for economic self-sufficiency.

You can stop underestimating yourself, and instead, realize how good you are.

You can demand equality in your relationships with men...insist that your husband or partner be as willing to share the housework and childcare as he is to share your paycheck.

You can fight back...gain skills in self-defense and, even better, learn a martial art so that you can feel strong and in control of your own safety.

You can speak up. Don't be afraid to identify yourself as a feminist. A feminist is someone who believes that women deserve economic, political, and social equality. A feminist is someone who values and respects women. Valuing women does not have to imply devaluing men...it merely elevates women to their deserved position as equals in society.

Women who identify themselves as feminists are negatively labeled because the power structure has not wanted us to speak up...negative labels are their attempt to keep us silent. As so well stated by the writer Rebecca West in 1913,

"I myself have never been able to figure out precisely what feminism is. I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat."

Don't be silenced. Speak up.

And for all of us, positive change comes from our treatment of

others. To paraphrase Dr. Jonetta Cole, the President of Spelman College, social change is remembering that sexism, racism and homophobia are not genetic--they are learned. And if they are learned they can be unlearned.

Social change, then, is teaching your children to believe in and act on the principles of gender and racial equality. It is refusing to tolerate sexist, racist or homophobic jokes and comments from your friends and coworkers. Those who respect themselves are best able to respect others as well so disrespect and humor at the expense of others are nothing to be proud of, they show only appalling immaturity and lack of character.

Social change is believing and teaching others to believe that all persons, regardless of gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation deserve to be treated fairly and with respect and tolerance.

One person can make a huge difference. Rosa Parks did. Rosa Parks was a black woman who in 1955 in racially segregated Montgomery Alabama refused to give up her seat on a bus for a white man. She said one word. That word was "NO". Rosa Parks was arrested, but that one word "NO" sparked the civil rights movement and changed America.

Anita Hill was one person. Anita Hill spoke up, her courage has inspired countless women to speak up about sexual harassment.

And Arthur Ashe was one person. The first African American

male tennis player to win both Wimbledon and the US Open, Ashe devoted much of his life to working for the Civil Rights movement worldwide and, later, formed a foundation dedicated to searching for a cure for AIDS. He worked tirelessly for these causes until the day he died. His contributions to a better world vastly exceeded the 49 years in which he lived.

For you today, I know that joy, relief, and thoughts about what comes next for you are paramount in your minds. But I hope that you remember throughout your lives the power of one person. That person is you, and you can make a difference. We need you.

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